

BOSTON GLOBE
6 March 1984

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ARTICLE APPEARED
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US sources: Iraq using poison gas

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WASHINGTON - Iraq is using mustard gas of its own manufacture in attempting to repel "human wave" assaults by Iranian irregulars, according to well-placed Administration officials.

In addition, a second facility designed to manufacture nerve gas weapons is said to be nearing completion. The Soviet Union, the sources said, has helped Iraq establish the capability to make poison gas.

This intelligence came as the United States accused Iraq yesterday of using "lethal chemical weapons" against Iranian forces.

John Hughes, the State Department spokesman, said government analysts have recently concluded there was firm evidence of the use of poison gas. "There can be no justification for [the use of such weapons] by any country," he said.

Hughes declined to identify what gas weapons have been used in the conflict.

While Iran has claimed for more than a year that Iraq was resorting to gas warfare, the sources said that widespread use of mustard gas appears not to have taken place until recently - in reaction to large-scale assaults by Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the vicinity of Basra, Iraq.

[One of five Iranian soldiers being treated in Sweden died yesterday, and doctors said they believed he had been "exposed to chemical weapons," the Associated Press reported. Chemicals also caused the

burns suffered by 10 soldiers flown to Austria, doctors in Vienna said.

[The 15 soldiers were flown to Sweden and Austria over the weekend. Iran said they had been injured in Iraqi attacks east of Basra. They said Iraq dropped nerve gas and nitrogen mustard, and asked the United Nations to investigate.]

Late last week, after the intelligence community had concluded that Iraqis were indeed using gas warfare, the Reagan Administration was in a quandary about what to do about it. They had urged the Iraqis privately to stop using such weapons, to no avail.

Last Friday, when Alan Romberg, another State Department spokesman, was pressed to comment on Iranian charges, he would only say that if they were true "we would find that a problem. We would regret and oppose the use of such weapons."

Part of the Administration's quandary is that it does not want to see Iran triumph in the war, for fear it would attempt to place a revolutionary fundamentalist Islamic regime in power in Baghdad. That, in turn, could shake up the regimes of Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf oil producers.

But on the other hand, the United States has long called for an outright ban on the manufacture, possession or use of all poison gas weapons and is preparing a draft treaty on the subject. The Soviet Union recently indicated some willingness to consider on-site inspection of the destruction of gas weapons if a treaty can be concluded.

The United States also has made much of allegations that the Soviets have been involved in the use of poison toxin weapons in Afghanistan, Laos and Cambodia.

Thus, for the United States to turn a

blind eye to evidence that Iraq was employing mustard gas weapons against attacking Iranians would have seemed hypocritical. Insofar as is known, Iranian forces for the most part have not been equipped with gas masks.

But Hughes specifically linked his condemnation of alleged Iraqi use of lethal chemical weapons with criticism of Iran for its "intransigent refusal to deviate from its avowed objective of eliminating the legitimate government of neighboring Iraq." Such refusal, he said, was "inconsistent with the accepted norms of behavior among nations."